DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 088 UD 029 926

AUTHOR Natriello, Gary; And Others
TITLE Between the Rock of Standards and the Hard Place of Accommodation: Evaluation Practices of Teachers in High Schools Serving Disadvantaged Students.
INSTITUTION Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students, Baltimore, MD.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO CDS-R-47
PUB DATE Apr 94
CONTRACT R117R90002
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Evaluation Methods; High Schools; High School Students; Student Behavior; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Response; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study examines how teachers evaluate student performance in five inner-city high schools that serve disadvantaged student populations. The study is based on in-depth interviews with 78 teachers. Each teacher responded to a series of questions about the practices employed to assess the academic performance of their students. Analyses of assessment practices included the actual activities teachers engaged in, the standards they employed, the records they kept, the initial assessment activities they performed at the beginning of a term, and additional information about the types of students they would like to have. Analyses also examined the quality or validity of the assessments they made of students in their classes, and the problems that were especially pertinent in assessing the performance of disadvantaged students. These problems included frequent absenteeism, inconsistent patterns of performance, differences between background experiences and school literacy demands, students' verbosity or quietness, and immigrant language problems. The analyses indicated that students who are more disadvantaged are likely to receive more open and fewer closed assessments of their performance, to have dimensions of performance such as attendance and effort included in their assessments, and be assessed in terms of ipsative, ability-based, or effort-based standards. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 371 088

SCOPE OF INTEREST NOTICE
The ERIC Facility has assigned this document for processing to: UD
In our judgment, this document is also of interest to the Clearinghouses noted to the right. Indexing should reflect their special points of view. TM

CDS

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Between the Rock of Standards and the Hard Place Of Accommodation: Evaluation Practices of Teachers In High Schools Serving Disadvantaged Students

Gary Natriello
Teachers College - Columbia University

Carolyn J. Riehl
University of Michigan

Aaron M. Pallas
Michigan State University

Report No. 47

April 1994

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD029936

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Advisory Panel

Beatriz Arias, College of Education, Arizona State University

Mary Frances Berry, Department of History, University of Pennsylvania

Anthony S. Bryk, Department of Education, University of Chicago

Edmund Gordon (Chair), Department of Psychology, Yale University

Ronald D. Henderson, National Education Association

Vinetta Jones, Executive Director, EQUITY 2000, College Board

Arturo Madrid, Director, Tomas Rivera Center

Hernan LaFontaine, Administration and Supervision, Southern Connecticut State University

William Julius Wilson, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago

Center Liaison

Harold Himmelfarb, Office of Educational Research and Improvement

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Between the Rock of Standards and the Hard Place Of Accommodation: Evaluation Practices of Teachers in High Schools Serving Disadvantaged Students

Gary Natriello
Teachers College - Columbia University

Carolyn J. Riehl
University of Michigan

Aaron M. Pallas
Michigan State University

Report No. 47

April 1994

Published by the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students, supported as a national research and development center by funds from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), United States Department of Education (R117R90002). The opinions expressed in this publication do not reflect the position or policy of OERI, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

The Center

The mission of the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students (CDS) is to significantly improve the education of disadvantaged students at each level of schooling through new knowledge and practices produced by thorough scientific study and evaluation. The Center conducts its research in four program areas: The Early and Elementary Education Program, The Middle Grades and High Schools Program, the Language Minority Program, and the School, Family, and Community Connections Program.

The Early and Elementary Education Program

This program is working to develop, evaluate, and disseminate instructional programs capable of bringing disadvantaged students to high levels of achievement, particularly in the fundamental areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. The goal is to expand the range of effective alternatives which schools may use under Chapter 1 and other compensatory education funding and to study issues of direct relevance to federal, state, and local policy on education of disadvantaged students.

The Middle Grades and High Schools Program

This program is conducting research syntheses, survey analyses, and field studies in middle and high schools. The three types of projects move from basic research to useful practice. Syntheses compile and analyze existing knowledge about effective education of disadvantaged students. Survey analyses identify and describe current programs, practices, and trends in middle and high schools, and allow studies of their effects. Field studies are conducted in collaboration with school staffs to develop and evaluate effective programs and practices.

The Language Minority Program

This program represents a collaborative effort. The University of California at Santa Barbara and the University of Texas at El Paso are focusing on the education of Mexican-American students in California and Texas; studies of dropout among children of recent immigrants have been conducted in San Diego and Miami by Johns Hopkins, and evaluations of learning strategies in schools serving Navajo Indians have been conducted by the University of Northern Arizona. The goal of the program is to identify, develop, and evaluate effective programs for disadvantaged Hispanic, American Indian, Southeast Asian, and other language minority children.

The School, Family, and Community Connections Program

This program is focusing on the key connections between schools and families and between schools and communities to build better educational programs for disadvantaged children and youth. Initial work is seeking to provide a research base concerning the most effective ways for schools to interact with and assist parents of disadvantaged students and interact with the community to produce effective community involvement.

Abstract

This study examines how teachers evaluate student performance in five inner-city high schools that serve disadvantaged student populations. The study is based on in-depth interviews with 78 teachers. Each teacher responded to a series of questions about the practices employed to assess the academic performance of their students. Analyses of assessment practices included the actual activities teachers engaged in, the standards they employed, the records they kept, the initial assessment activities they carried out at the beginning of a term, and additional information about students they would like to have. Analyses also examined the quality or validity of the assessments they made of students in their classes, and the problems that were especially pertinent in assessing the performance of disadvantaged students. These problems included students' frequent absences, inconsistent patterns of performance, differences between background experiences and school literacy demands, students' verbosity or quietness, and immigrant language problems. The analyses indicated that students who are more disadvantaged are likely to receive more open and fewer closed assessments of their performance, to have dimensions of performance such as attendance and effort included in their assessments, and be assessed in terms of ipsative, ability-based, or effort-based standards. The analyses highlight the dilemma faced by teachers in assessing the performance of disadvantaged students -- they employ strategies of assessment that offer disadvantaged students some hope of experiencing success and that maintain meaningful positive and negative sanctions for these students, but these strategies may also be seen as a lowering of standards in order to accommodate disadvantaged students.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the assistance of those teachers and administrators in the five high schools who helped us plan this study and to those who participated in the interviews.

Introduction

The evaluation of student performance in schools has been examined from a number of perspectives. It has been a focus of national concern primarily around the issue of the development of national standards for student performance (e.g., Resnick, 1992). It has been a key element of reform efforts at the state level as individual states have adopted and upgraded standardized testing programs (Goertz, 1988). It has been the focal point for the efforts of teachers and local school districts seeking to develop and implement new or alternative assessment processes (Mitchell, 1992).

The assessment of student performance has played at least three roles in the recent school reform movement. First, student assessment provided the impetus for reforming schools by revealing evidence of the shortcomings of the current educational system. The growth of state-based competency testing in the 1970's added to the evidence of declining student performance already mounting from other sources and can be viewed as one of the precipitants of the educational reform movement of the 1980's (Archbald & Porter, 1990).

Second, student assessment has become an instrument for school reform. Among the various policy initiatives designed to improve the performance of the educational system, the assessment of student performance has been a policy tool often used to bring pressure to change schooling practices. Increased testing of students has been one of the common initiatives to arise in the educational reform movement of the 1980s as state governments (Goertz, 1988) and more recently the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) have mounted efforts to assess student performance in order to determine the overall performance of the educational system. Not only have such testing programs increased in number, but increasingly the stakes of such testing programs have been raised (Archbald & Porter, 1990).

Finally, the assessment of student performance has also become a target for reform as policy makers and practitioners alike have become increasingly discontent with current methods for assessing student performance in a world in which assessment takes on an ever more prominent role (Baker, 1989). Assessment practices have been the target for advocacy groups concerned about the abuses of individual rights that surround many assessment practices (Neill & Medina, 1989), for analysts interested in the broader effects on social organization (Hanson, 1993); for critics of the professionals who utilize assessment technologies in their practice (Milofsky, 1989), and for those both inside (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992) and outside (Berlak, et al., 1992) the measurement and assessment community who have called for a redirection of effort to develop new approaches to assessment.

The continuing interest in the assessment of student performance has generated a wide range of studies of the assessment process and its impact on students. (For reviews of some of these studies see Natriello, 1987a; 1987b; Crooks, 1988.) Herman & Dorr-Bremme (1984) have conducted a survey of practices in U.S. public schools. Nevertheless, much remains to be learned about the current patterns of student assessment practices in U.S. schools and the association of those practices with a variety of student outcomes.

Earlier, we argued that evaluating the academic work of disadvantaged youth posed certain dilemmas for teachers (Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984; Natriello & McPartland, 1987; Natriello, Pallas, & Riehl, 1990). These dilemmas center around the difficulty of balancing the need to set high and demanding standards with the need to motivate students to perform better in the wake of previously poor performance and in social contexts that are often unconducive to learning. In this report we present evidence bearing on these dilemmas collected from teachers in high schools serving predominantly disadvantaged student populations.

Methods

The current study is based on in-depth interviews with teachers in five inner-city high schools serving disadvantaged populations. These interviews were conducted during school hours and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviewers followed a predetermined interview protocol, but were free to explore related areas of interest raised by the teachers.

Sample of Schools

The schools included in the study are located in the metropolitan New York region. Three of the schools are in one large urban school district; the other two schools are in smaller urban centers. Each school serves a predominantly disadvantaged student population.

Jackson High School. Jackson High School is a zoned comprehensive high school. Students from several economically depressed neighborhoods are assigned to Jackson if they are not accepted into one of the specialized high schools in the city. The student population of 2500 is about 46% Hispanic, 46% Black, 2% Asian, and 7% White. Almost all students are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs, and student mobility is a problem.

Jackson was selected to receive city funding for a special dropout prevention program on the basis of its high annual dropout rate and low average student attendance. Through this program, the school developed a mini-school for at-risk students, a "P.M. School" to enable students to earn additional credits after the regular school day, and additional counseling services provided in partnership with a local community-based organization. Jackson High School offers specialized programs in health careers in conjunction with a neighboring hospital, and in law and criminal justice in conjunction with a local community college.

Jefferson High School. Jefferson High School is one of several alternative high schools in a large urban school district in a northeast city. It occupies space on the third and fourth floors of a building that also holds a public middle school. Its neighborhood has over many decades provided tenement housing for immigrants; today, drug abuse and homelessness are major problems in the community.

The school's student body consists largely of immigrant Asian students who need to learn English and earn their high school diplomas, as well as other students, mostly African-American, who have been expelled or discharged from other high schools, especially a comprehensive high school located in the same neighborhood. Many of the school's approximately 575 students are limited-English proficient, and they tend to be older than average students in their grade levels. Because they often enter Jefferson High School from another high school, either in the United States or in a foreign country, students typically do not spend a full four years at Jefferson; two or two-and-a-half years is the average. The school strives to balance the ratio of immigrant and transfer students at about 65% – 35%.

The school obtains students from a variety of sources. Some students are referred through word of mouth; they hear about the school from family members, friends, and so on. The school also places advertisements in local papers, especially Chinese-language papers, about dates for registering for the school. Students are referred from other high schools and from social service agencies. Students seldom come to Jefferson High School directly from a junior high or middle school.

Washington High School. Washington High School is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in a large urban center in the Northeast. It is surrounded by three large housing projects and many abandoned buildings and frame houses in poor condition. Almost all of the 1,200 students enrolled in the school are African American, and about 3% are Hispanic. Student mobility is very high; the school experiences a 35-40% turnover in the student population each year.

The annual dropout rate at Washington High School is approximately three times the state average. In 1991-92, Washington admitted approximately 350 new ninth graders, but had only 170 seniors. Although the high turnover rate makes comparing these figures risky, it seems a substantial number of those who enter do not survive to graduation.

Roosevelt High School. Roosevelt High School is the only high school in a Northeastern town of about 39,000 which has experienced a declining industrial base and an increasingly aging population in recent years. The population of the town is about fifty percent Hispanic, but the student body of the high school is over 75% Hispanic, with another 12% being African American and 12% being white. Student mobility is high, and the school's annual dropout rate of about 13% is much higher than the state average. Over half of the 1600 students in the school require special services: 15% are eligible for bilingual programs and over a third are eligible for state compensatory education services.

The school was built in the early seventies, and houses the ninth through twelfth grades. According to the principal, the school is "jammed" because it was built before the advent of mandated programs which limit class sizes in special programs and thus require more separate instructional spaces.

Lincoln High School. Lincoln High School is located close to the midtown business district in a major Northeastern city. The school draws no students from the residential neighborhood in which it is located. Rather, students come from all over the city. Of the 2800 students, approximately 52% are African American, 41% are Hispanic, and the remaining 6% are Asian or white. The school has a larger than average proportion of male students: 65% of the students are male.

Although Lincoln High is organized as a basic, comprehensive high school, it features several unique vocational programs, including a culinary arts program, an aviation program, and an elevator repair program. Recent dropout prevention services in the school have emphasized improving contact between the school and the students' homes. The school has recently invested in an extensive local area computer network and plans to make greater use of a variety of student information on the course assignment process.

Sample of Teachers

Teachers in a variety of departments were interviewed at each school. Table 1 shows the number of teachers interviewed.

Table 1

School	Number of Teachers								
	N	Eng	Mat	Sci	Soc	ESL	SpED	Voc	FL	Couns
Jackson	10	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	0
Jefferson	11	2	2	2	2	3	0	0	0	0
Washington	11	3	2	2	2	0	1	1	0	0
Roosevelt	10	2	2	2	2	0	1	1	0	0
Lincoln	11	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	1	1

At least two teachers were interviewed in the departments of English, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition, at least two other teachers suggested by school personnel from among the departments of ESL, special education, vocational/business and foreign language were interviewed. These teachers were nominated as being able to provide a good perspective on teacher evaluation practices by school administrators and teachers interviewed.

Interview Questions

Each teacher responded to a series of questions about the practices employed to assess the academic performance of their students. The strategy was to survey evaluation practices in general, rather than to focus on the problems posed in evaluating the performance of disadvantaged students. Thus the teachers' responses locate the problems that they have in evaluating the performance of disadvantaged students in the broader context of classroom assessment practices.

The interview began with a general question designed to elicit an overall description of the approach taken:

> Could you begin by describing the way you evaluate the academic performance of students in your classes?

Following the teacher's response to this general question, a series of probes asked teachers to discuss their practices regarding initial assessments of students at the beginning of the term:

> Probe: When you walk into a new class at the beginning of a term, do you know what to expect students to already know?
>
> Probe: Do you do anything special at the beginning of a term to gauge students' performance?
>
> Probe: What kind of information would you like to have about students at the beginning of a term?

Teachers were next asked to describe the records associated with their assessments of student performance:

> Probe: What kinds of records of the evaluation process do you keep?

This question provided additional insight into what teachers considered important enough to record.

A second major line of inquiry focused on the quality of the evaluations performed by teachers:

> Do you think that you generally get an accurate assessment of student academic performance? Why or why not?

This question was followed by a more specific question regarding potential difficulties in evaluating student performance:

> Probe: What students are the most difficult for you to assess accurately? Why?

Analyses

The interviewer took detailed notes during each teacher interview. These notes were then entered into a textbase to permit easy manipulation. Using an iterative, comparative analytic process similar to that described in Strauss (1987), Miles & Huberman (1984), and Bogden & Biklen (1982), we coded data within the question categories and searched for patterns among the data elements.

The aim of the analysis was to identify descriptions of teacher assessment practices in schools serving disadvantaged student populations. We make no attempt to generalize beyond the current set of five schools, and recognize that even within these schools, we have not explored the full range of teacher practices. Nonetheless, the data reported here provide a closer look at the operation of assessment practices in schools serving disadvantaged populations.

Results

The analyses of the teacher interview data identified multiple themes in the two major areas represented in the questions: the patterns of assessment practices reported by the teachers, and the teachers' judgments about the quality of their assessments of students.

In reporting the results of the interviews, direct quotations from the teachers are included in quotation marks. Contextual material taken from the interview and rephrased by the interviewer is included in brackets. Numbers enclosed in parentheses refer to the identification number of the teacher. Each teacher may be identified by the name of the school and the teacher identification number assigned within that school.

Assessment Practices

The analyses of responses to the questions pertaining to assessment practices included the actual activities in which teachers engage to assess student performance, the standards employed, the records kept by teachers, the initial assessment activities of teachers at the beginning of a term, and the additional information about students desired by teachers. Each of these areas provide additional insights into the assessment practices of teachers in these high schools serving at-risk students.

Assessment Activities. Teachers talked about the kinds of concrete assessment activities used in their classrooms. They often listed a fairly standard set of activities including tests, quizzes, in-class assignments, and homework. Tests and quizzes were often coordinated with a textbook chapter. Tests were given after major units of study. The frequency of such tests varied but a test every week or every two weeks was a common pattern.

Quizzes were sometimes used to focus students' attention on difficult material or to enforce other rules in the classroom. For example, a science teacher at Lincoln (7) reported that "I give short quizzes during the first five minutes of class so they come on time, as a review of yesterday's material."

Teachers varied in how they assigned and assessed homework. Some teachers graded homework; others simply gave students a "check" if homework was completed; still others used a system of check minus, check, and check plus to assess performance. Teachers in lower level classes often reported that they could not assign homework because it just wouldn't be done. A special education teacher at Lincoln (8) reported that "I don't give homework -- the students don't do it, and it screws up your planning. If students are conscientious, I'll give them homework, and they'll do it. Our students don't really have the home environment for homework."

A social studies teacher in the same school (9) noted that "Homework is given 3 times a week. It is checked for credit. I look for completeness, not accuracy. Sometimes I give it more often. A major problem is that students don't do it." Other teachers gave more homework. A social studies teacher at Washington reported that "I give a lot of homework...the homework is reading and writing."

Still other teachers gave homework only to certain classes. A social studies teacher at Roosevelt high school (10) reported that "In the top classes they have outside work." Teachers who reported placing more emphasis on homework just being done than on the quality of the work seem to be reacting to the fact that in these schools, students often do not complete homework assignments. Thus teachers adopt a strategy of rewarding students for completing the homework assignment.

Several teachers noted the limitations of homework as an indicator of general student performance. One social studies teacher at Washington High School (4) observed that "I have students who do very nice homework, but then on the test, when it's about mastering the material, it's another story. I have a girl who turns in wonderful homeworks, but the tests are very different."

A smaller number of teachers discussed how they included class participation in the as-

sessment. For example, one social studies teacher at Washington (4) reported that "I have a lot of class discussion. I have a seating plan in my hand, so when they answer a question, I put a little dot by their name...This I use extensively. I'll have three cards by the end of a semester." Some teachers, especially those teaching students with learning difficulties, reported using participation as a way around the problems some students have taking traditional tests. A special education teacher at Washington (1) reported that "Some students are not test takers so I evaluate them verbally."

A social studies teacher at Lincoln (9) used other modes to overcome student problems with test taking: "Class attitudes and homework. So that I don't rely on tests alone, I use these two because some students are so bad at taking tests." One special education teacher at Washington (1) even described how a student's grade might be changed through assessment using an alternate mode: "[Quizzes are given] once a week to summarize the week's work. Suppose I think they're capable of doing more, I might ask them verbally and will change the quiz score."

Still other teachers considered class participation in a less central way in their assessments. A business teacher at Roosevelt (1) reported that "I don't really give students a grade for class participation; and I don't record anything on this; I just consider it when giving a final grade."

Still, some teachers noted the limitations of evaluating students based on class participation. A social studies teacher at Jefferson (11) reported "I have a discussion-oriented class -- I ask provocative questions. I like to do that, but it's not a good indicator of their academic abilities, since many students who don't write well are very verbal." A social studies teacher at Roosevelt High School noted another problem with assessments based on class participation: "In-class answers -- they don't like to do this, because students may know it [the answer], but don't like to answer, so this is not a true evaluation."

Some teachers discussed their use of observations of students as part of their evaluation system. An English teacher at Roosevelt (3) reported that "I use writing, oral communications, body language, and feedback during discussions. I try to make eye contact with each student and notice who's paying attention. I trust my instinct and individual daily feedback and ability to read body language more than anything." A math teacher in the same school (4) noted that "I base a lot on observation -- seeing what the students can do."

Individual teachers also reported a variety of other assessment activities in their classes. An ESL teacher at Jefferson (1) reported using group grading on occasion "This term I'm doing group grading once in a while. This is new for me. I give them projects and even open book tests -- I want the good students to help the others." A science and math teacher at the same school reversed testing roles, reporting that "I had them create a test, I answered it, and they had to correct it." This same teacher also used student journals as part of the assessment process -- students were assigned to write in their journals daily and received credit for doing so. An English teacher at Roosevelt (5) also used student journals: "Journal writing is an ongoing daily assignment. I check them every other week. If a student isn't figuring out what's going on, I can get this from their journals, and then I use oral testing with them."

These kinds of activities were rare in the teachers' reports. Most teachers employed the assessment activities described above.

Many of the teachers described the contribution of the various assessment activities to a final grade. A science teacher at Roosevelt (8) counted lab assessments as 50% of the final grade and tests, quizzes, and homework as the other 50%. A science teacher at Washington (5) reported that "test scores will count 60%, lab work will count 20%, homework will count 20%." A Washington social studies teacher (6) developed final grades by counting "one-third for class participation and their responses and interest and contribution, one-third for homework and written essays..., and one-third for class

tests...." A vocational teacher at Washington (10) reported that in a recent class "The final counted 50%, quizzes 30% and homework and class participation 20%." An English teacher at Lincoln (2) used a system in which "class participation counts as one-third of the grade, written homework counts for a third, and composition counts for a third." A science teacher at Lincoln (7) explained that "tests are worth 40%...quizzes and lab work count for 35%..., and classwork and homework count for 15%."

These various systems for weighting assessment activities in arriving at the final grade are revealing. First, teachers vary considerably in how they construct grades. Second, the balance between controlled or closed assessments (in which students have restricted access to materials, i.e., assessments such as tests and quizzes) and less controlled or open assessments (such as homework and lab work), can differ dramatically. The Washington vocational teacher used a system in which 80% of the grade came from a final exam and quizzes while the social studies teacher in the same school counted such restricted assessments as only 30% of the final grade.

Third, teachers differ substantially in counting class participation. The Washington social studies teacher and the Lincoln English teacher each counted participation as one-third of the final grade, while the business teacher from Roosevelt considered participation informally after computing the grade based on other assessments. Obviously, these very different systems for calculating final grades could result in quite different grades for the same performance.

Although most of the teachers interviewed discussed their assessment practices in terms of concrete assessment activities, a small number of teachers raised issues related to the areas of student performance which might be included in assessment. Here too, there was considerable variation among those interviewed, especially around the issue of including attendance and effort in the assessment process. Many teachers included neither attendance nor effort in their discussions of the ways they assess students. A few, however, specifically included one or both.

A special education teacher at Jackson (4) set clear expectations about student attendance at the outset: "I tell them I'll allow them to be absent once a week. We give rewards for attendance, for example, juice or cake in class." A math teacher at Lincoln (5) began by noting that "I keep track of student attendance and absences."

Attendance is a problem in these high schools serving disadvantaged students. A math teacher at Washington reported that "There are 30 students in each remedial math class, but in the first period class I never see more than 10-12. Some I've never seen. In the fourth period class I have 25 students, and I see 12-15. Some I've never seen from day one. These are juniors and seniors and just might be tired of school."

A science teacher at Roosevelt (7) began describing the classroom assessment system by saying "I count everything. I look for participation and effort." An English teacher at Washington (10) reported including information on "lateness, absences, who doesn't get bathroom privileges anymore, etc." This same teacher reported that in a reading lab class "I grade strictly on effort....The grade is based on effort. I watch who gets their folders open when class begins, who can pick up from where they left the day before, who pays attention to what's on the board, etc."

The descriptions of assessment practices provided by these teachers of at-risk students thus reveal two dimensions along which practices may differ substantially. The first, noted previously, is the relative importance of closed and open assessments. The second is the degree to which teachers include attendance and effort in the final grade, and this would seem to be particularly at issue for at-risk youth whose attendance and effort are often in question. To attempt to influence both attendance and effort, teachers extend the assessment system to include them, which gives the teacher some leverage over student behavior in these two areas. However, this increased leverage comes at a price: evaluations of students that focus less directly on the quality of the academic work produced.

Standards. Teachers sometimes reflected on the kinds of standards they employed in assessing students. Five kinds of standards have been identified (Natriello & McPartland, 1987; Natriello, 1990; Airasian, 1991): external predetermined standards, normative standards based on the performance of the group, ipsative standards based on previous performance of the individual student, effort standards based on the amount of effort a student puts forth, and ability standards based on the relationship between a student's performance and information on the student's ability.

External predetermined standards or criterion-referenced standards were most often discussed by teachers in connection with state competency tests. Both states in which the schools in the study were located employed standardized tests of student performance.

Group or normative-referenced standards are those which are set in relation to the performance of a class or other group in the school. Teachers in the five high schools seldom referred to group-referenced standards. One science teacher at Lincoln (7) did imply such a standard at least in the minds of students when describing a system for documenting participation: "I have a copy of the seating chart and I put a mark next to the name every time a student responds in class. They see this and are motivated; there's an element of competing against each other to get the most marks." Yet there were few such references to group standards and little sense that students were competing against each other in these schools. Perhaps this is because student background differences made such normative standards seem inappropriate. Such was the feeling of an English teacher at Jefferson (9), the school with large numbers of Asian immigrant children, who reported that "I can't evaluate the class based on averages when you have American and Chinese students, they're so different -- the Americans have been exposed to literature for years."

Somewhat more frequent were comments reflecting individual standards based on students' prior performances. A remedial math teacher at Washington (9) used a system of standards based on individual accomplishment: "Each student works individually on their own level. They each have a folder. I grade them on what they do every day and their tests are individualized. The ones who come to class do well; there's no peer pressure."

Standard setting was also based on student effort. An English teacher at Washington High School (10) reported that "The grade is based on effort -- I watch who gets their folders open when class begins, who can pick up from where they left the day before, who pays attention to what's on the board, etc." Another teacher, a social studies teacher at Lincoln (9), shifted to effort as a basis for evaluation for students having difficulty with other assessments: "I don't grade too subjectively, but there are some students who are really struggling, and I might be more lenient if they are really trying."

Standards set in reference to student ability were also discussed by some teachers in the interviews. These teachers tried to determine if a student was performing up to his or her potential. For example, a science teacher at Lincoln (10) reported that "If the students are working to ability, I try to assess along that -- I don't judge them against other students."

But the basis for standards was not clear or salient to all teachers. Indeed, many teachers interviewed did not discuss how they established standards for student performance. Other teachers admitted to confusion about the standards issue -- such as the ESL teacher at Jackson (7) who said: "I have been teaching for 5 years and I still don't have this down. I have a lot of questions about it -- are you comparing students to others in their class, or is there some sort of fixed standard?"

Of the five types of standards identified in the literature and reflected in the teacher interviews, only predetermined standards and group-referenced standards appeared to be employed to evoke higher levels of student performance. Teachers discussed individually-based or ipsative standards, effort-based standards, and ability-based standards as strategies for dealing with weaker student performance. In general, these three kinds of

standards were used to focus on positive aspects of student performance -- that is, students were described as improving over previous performance, as putting forth effort, and as performing well in light of their ability. Thus these three types of standards appear to allow teachers to encourage students whose performance in terms of fixed or group standards could only be interpreted as disappointing.

Records. Teachers were asked to describe the ways in which they keep records of student performance in their classes. Once again there was enormous variation. Some teachers kept only minimal records. The social studies teacher at Washington (4) reported that "I keep the information on the Delaney cards and on another set of cards, just to be safe." The "Delaney cards" are 3 by 5 inch cards issued for each student in the school system. They obviously offer only the most minute space for recording information on student performance.

A number of teachers kept a standard gradebook. A science teacher at Jefferson (5) reported that "I put records in the gradebook. I don't keep individual files on students" and a social studies teacher in the same school noted that "I keep a gradebook, nothing else." Some teachers employed computer-based recording systems either instead of or in addition to a standard gradebook. A science teacher at Roosevelt High School explained that "I use an electronic gradebook. I store anything that's numerical. In my regular gradebook I track homework -- give a check, if its not done I turn it back to the student, and they get a blank."

Some teachers kept more extensive records on poor performing students. A special education teacher at Roosevelt High School explained that: "For real low level students, I jot down things in a lesson book about how they responded to a lesson, or their behavior -- to see how long it continues." A social studies teacher at the same school also recorded participation only for low performing students: "We assume students participate, but in my low classes I record this -- participation, reading, etc. I might put a check mark for this."

Another group of teachers kept more extensive records of student performance, often in the form of student folders, or logs. An English teacher at Roosevelt High School reported using folders for student work: "I have an individual folder for each student and keep EVERY scrap of paper they do. I show it to parents, or use it if someone wants to know what they were capable of doing in the 10th grade." A special education teacher at Washington High School explained how materials in a student folder might influence the final grade. "I keep a folder for each student and use it at the end of the marking period. Say the student's grades add up to a 75 average, I might review the folder and then the student might get an 80-85." But keeping more extensive records on performance could cause some problems, as these comments from an English teacher at Lincoln (4) High School indicate: "This year I've kept some folders of student papers, but I'd rather not because it accumulates. Sometimes I'll keep their old tests to show their parents and so on."

Teachers who had more elaborate record keeping systems often devised ways to involve students more in the record keeping and reporting process. A science teacher at Lincoln (10) used student notebooks in this way: "My students keep notebooks -- all their assignments are in the notebooks. They use it to study for exams, and I check them every week. They know exactly where they are in terms of grades, because everything in my gradebook is in the notebooks -- tests, homework, etc."

An English teacher at Roosevelt High School (5) used student folders in a similar way: "Throughout the marking period, the students put all their homework in a folder -- all the stuff that the end of marking period exam will cover (homework, lecture notes, etc.). They take this home to use. I record that they have all this material in my gradebook."

An English teacher in the college bound program at Park West High School made student standardized test scores a salient feature of their work folders: "I keep the folder [of student work] and a gradebook.... These sheets of scores and breakdowns [from the CTBS]

are fastened to the inside of the student's folder, so that student knows how he's done. A different form of the CTBS and writing sample are given at the end of the year, and we keep this over the year [for comparison]. Plus we all have the DRP scores which we compare to the CTBS and these scores are also put on the students' folders. In the junior year -- students take the reading/writing RCT and we also put these scores on the folder so the student knows how he's doing."

Individual teachers reported using other methods to involve students in the record keeping and reporting process. A science teacher at Roosevelt High School (7) distributed and then collected tokens from students to summarize performance of tasks over the marking period: "Chips. I give out these for various things, for bringing a notebook, or doing homework. I give them to the students, and don't record them anywhere. At the end of the marking period, I call for them back." An English teacher at Jefferson (8) posted records of performance to encourage students to turn in work: "I have done a poster in class with student ID numbers, or I'll put up a list of outstanding homeworks."

Thus teachers differed rather dramatically in both the extent of their record keeping and the ways in which such records were used in the classroom. Some teachers kept minimal records, just enough to allow them to develop some kind of final grade; others kept folders with all student work for the grading period. Some teachers used records for their own purposes in developing grades; others regularly shared such information with students to keep them informed of their progress. At least a few teachers kept more extensive records for their lower achieving classes. This appears to be related to the tendency to include areas beyond narrowly defined academic performance for lower achieving students.

Initial Assessment. Two questions about teachers' overall approach to assessing student performance focused on the initial practices of teachers at the beginning of a term and teacher desires for initial information on students. Both questions provoked a wide array of responses.

Concerning their initial practices, few teachers reported no special assessment. The math teacher at Washington (8) replied: "Not really; I don't do anything." More typically, teachers reported some assessment activity, but the nature of the activities varied considerably both in substance and form.

The most common type of initial assessment was a standardized or teacher-made test. A science teacher at Washington (2) explained that "At the beginning of the term I give them a pretest to see their skills -- to see if they have knowledge of scientific concepts, critical thinking. I also ask them to write a brief essay to see how they put words together." Similarly, an English teacher at the same high school noted that "At the beginning of each term, we give the California Test of Basic Skills, and we give the scores to the students.... We also give a writing sample -- it's graded holistically on a 1-5 scale, and we indicate areas where students need work."

At Jackson, the math teachers (2) (3) reported that the math department uses a pre-algebra test for all incoming tenth grade students. Several teachers noted that the results of such initial assessments are often quite disappointing. A social studies teacher at Lincoln (9) reported that "We have pretests...that I try to give to see where the students are at, but I haven't had too much luck with them, so I just assume that we get blank slates."

Some teachers integrated an initial assessment into a review of previous material. A math teacher at Roosevelt (4) explained that "I kind of do a general review -- 1 to 2 days. I don't really test them, but it gives me a pretty good idea of who knows what." Another math teacher at the same high school (2) mentioned several activities used to provide information on initial student performance: "I just jump into problem-solving skills and see what skills the student have, e.g., detecting patterns, graph interpretation, making quadratic equations. I kind of go through Polya's Heuristics -- not all of this is on math. I also have the students work in groups over the course of a few days. I sit and watch each group and see how they're doing."

An ESL teacher at Jefferson (4) reported that "For ESL 3 or 5 you start with oral skills and can tell right away where the students are at." A science teacher at Lincoln also used a review process for assessing student skills, and often found disappointing results: "Normally, I start with a review of what the students did the year before, and if I see they don't have it, which most of them don't, you have to start from scratch. They need lab and measurements skills -- hands on skills -- but teachers in the earlier grades are loathe to give them lab work, so they don't typically have these skills and you have to start from scratch."

Several teachers reported that they asked students questions to determine their initial skill levels. A science teacher at Roosevelt (8) explained that "I discuss with the students the first few days, especially in Anatomy I want to know if they had Chemistry." An ESL teacher at Jefferson noted that "I ask them what textbook they used. I have a little talk with the students, I can tell their skills from that." A special education teacher at Washington (1) reported that such inquiries often reveal disappointing news about student background: "I'll just ask questions to see where I should start. This year my course outline said I should start at World War II, but I felt I should go back to the French Revolution."

Some teachers take a more formal approach to asking questions of students, using a survey instrument. Such instruments often inquire about more than just academic skills. An English teacher at Roosevelt (3) explained that: "I give a written survey on what books they've read, what magazines they have at home, the number of siblings, what TV programs are on at home (not just what they watch), if they work at home or have a job, where they spent the summer, what films they've seen. Frequently, I give a cultural literacy test -- asking the name of the mayor, governor, how far they are from New York City, what bay [our town] is on. They get a summer reading list - 4 books for the top class, 1 assignment for the others. I give a book report test and that helps me see their work. I also give quite a few writing assignments at the beginning of the term."

A science teacher (5) at Jackson noted that: "I use a standard learning style questionnaire. Also attitudes toward biology and personal things about science, the class, and the room." An English teacher at Washington (7) who used a diagnostic reading and writing test explained that, in addition: "I ask students to fill out an interview questionnaire in the beginning of the term; sometimes it's not always accurate. I ask biographical information, their interests, strengths, and weaknesses, what they'd like to study. Many students leave their home phone number blank -- I'd like this. If I confront them [and ask directly], they'll usually give it to me."

Some teachers directed their initial assessment activities at students with problems. A social studies teacher at Washington (6) explained that "I'd only want to know special problems that might prevent them from learning. I don't do it in all subjects." A math teacher at the same school (9) noted that "I give a diagnostic test to the remedial class. I do nothing in the regular academic class." A math teacher (10) at Jefferson noted that initial assessments are less often conducted on higher level classes because there is "...less need at the higher levels to know."

Some teachers seem to include non-academic domains in their initial assessment activities, to the exclusion of academic ones. A science teacher at Roosevelt High School (7) explained that: "I'm looking more for behavior than for carryover. Maybe I've lowered my expectations over the years because I find they don't carry a lot from previous courses. So the first few weeks I work on interpersonal skills and behavior. I don't even discuss academics the first few weeks. Then they tend to learn more later."

Sometimes this attempt to assess students beyond the academic domain is coupled with an alternative style of teacher-student interaction designed to encourage sharing of personal information, as in the case of an ESL teacher at Jackson (7) who reported that: "I find that in the last 2 weeks of a term when I become looser (and lose the don't smile disciplinary approach), I learn so much about the students. So now I'm reversing that. I spend time at the beginning of the term just getting

to know the students, and I find that I don't have to set up that structured, no-smile environment, because they have gotten to know me as a person. If I get them started on a group circle game or a discussion or whatever, to break the ice, I get to know the students and their strengths and problems much better than in a structured way."

Thus, as with many of the previously discussed dimensions of classroom assessment processes, teacher responses to our inquiry about their initial assessment activities revealed a striking range of approaches, both in content and process. Some teachers used quite standard assessments of basic academic skills; others employed alternative strategies to gather information on non-academic aspects of students' backgrounds, and still others report doing relatively little in the way of an initial assessment. Consistent with our earlier finding regarding the areas included in evaluations and the records kept on student performance, some teachers were more likely to employ initial assessment activities with lower achieving classes.

Information Wanted. Teachers asked about the information they wanted to have about students entering their classes evidenced a wide range of responses. Several of the teachers expressed concern about being biased by having information on their students at the start of a term. A science teacher at Washington (5) explained the dangers of negative information about students: "I've always thought that if I know too much about them...I don't want to be prejudiced in my expectations. I want to assume that they can all succeed, and I tell them that."

A special education teacher at the same school (1) saw dangers in having negative or positive information on students: "I really don't want anything. Sometimes you tend to be prejudiced if you know something negative about a student. Or if it's positive, you might expect too much from the student." Even teachers who do seek information on students worry about its impact on them. A social studies teacher at Jefferson (7) reported that "I had students do a survey about their family background and the number of schools attended. This is helpful, but I'm afraid it will prejudice me."

Some teachers resolve the conflict between wanting information on students but fearing its prejudicial effects by waiting a while before seeking such information. For example, a social studies teacher at Jackson (9) explained that "I don't like to know things -- I'd rather make my own decisions on the students. Then after the first week I might seek out information -- see what they did in past social studies classes, or talk to their English teacher, or talk to the guidance counselor if there's a problem, for example, a girl who was drunk in my classes."

Seeking information in response to a problem was a strategy followed by other teachers as well. A science teacher at Lincoln (7) explained that "I prefer not to know anything because it prejudices you. But if the student is not doing well in the grade level class, I'd like to know their test scores and if they are misplaced." Similarly, a social studies teacher at Washington (6) noted that "I'd only want to know special problems that might prevent them from learning. I don't want to prejudge students. I want to rate them on how they do in class."

Teachers varied in what kind of information they wanted on students. Some teachers were interested primarily in personal or social background information. Sometimes teachers wanted this information to be in a better position to engage students, like the science teacher at Roosevelt (7) who said that "I try to get to know something personal so I can approach them as persons, as soon as possible."

An English teacher at Roosevelt (5) reported that such information was often hard to come by but that it would be helpful: "What's happening in their home life. It takes me time to learn if students are in special ed, or even if they have emotional problems that maybe haven't even been identified. It would help if I knew which students have special needs. This information from special ed comes well into October."

A social studies teacher at Lincoln (6) explained that students are sometimes the only source of such information at the beginning of the term: "We don't usually know any-

thing about our students. We try to do some type of autobiographic assignment at the beginning of the year, but I don't know how real much of this information is -- it's from the students themselves.... Information on the students' home situations would be helpful, in terms of explaining student performance and behavior." This strategy of seeking the information from the students themselves is consistent with patterns reported earlier.

Teachers also noted that having information on students' personal and social situations would influence them to adjust their demands. An English teacher at Washington was quite blunt in asserting this: "I want to know who's going to punch me in the face if I press them. I'm a strict disciplinarian [and I want to know who will react poorly to my demands]. I had one student, the department chairperson warned me not to antagonize him, and this was very helpful.... This year we had a really bad riot. There was one student who almost beat up another student while in the principal's office. Later, that student threw a book in my classroom -- it didn't hit me but was certainly disruptive. I should have known what was going on...."

A math teacher at Washington explained how knowing about student personal and social situations would influence the assessment process: "I wouldn't mind knowing about personal difficulties -- then I could assess students in a different way. For example, if I know a student has three children at home and doesn't have time to do homework, I might give them more time in class to do work. I don't want to know if they failed before. I have a few students in my class now who come only to my class, I'm the only class they're passing."

Thus, personal and social information about students was viewed as providing important context for teaching practices, including assessment practices. This was particularly true for students who were being placed at risk by home and family situations.

Just as some teachers focused their discussion of the need for information about students on personal and social concerns, other teachers limited their discussion to the need for academic information. A science teacher at Lincoln (10) noted that "I really would like to know what level they're at -- in reading and math...." A math teacher at Washington (9) expressed a similar need: "I would like to know how students did before [this course] if they had to repeat courses, etc." A math teacher at Jefferson (6) noted that information from district standardized testing would be helpful: "For first time students I like to know what they took before and what happened to put them in fundamental math...also like to know if they took the fundamental math RCT (test) and an item analysis from the Board of Education, but for the fall test, we got the results in March."

In contrast to some of the teachers cited above who feared the biasing effects of information on students, a social studies teacher at Roosevelt High School (10) argued that specific information on students' previous academic performance would counteract the assumptions that teachers attach to the course track levels into which students are grouped for instruction: "Any of us teaching would like to know more. Sometimes we get hung up on labels (Top, etc.) and assume that they describe the students. But it's sometimes not true. I'd like to know specifics about background and how the student did in other classes. For example, if I were teaching American History, I'd like to know what they know from World History about the relation of American and other cultures. Also, performance...what did [a student] do to get his designation as a Top student, etc. Were there projects involved, current events...."

A number of teachers expressed the need for both social and academic information on students. An English teacher (2) at Lincoln wanted to know "If there have been any major academic problems in past years. If the student has access to tools at home [for studying]. If illnesses might keep students out of school, e.g., I have a student who has been out a lot this term, and now it turns out that she just didn't have bus fare." An English teacher at Roosevelt High School (3) explained the importance of this information for teaching: "I would like to know their educational background -- what schools they've gone to, if they've moved around a lot. Also

the names of parents and who lives in foster homes. A few years ago a student told me she lived in a Catholic charity home. There are times during a class discussion when it would be great to know if a student had a child or had been abused -- you want to be sensitive to a student's embarrassment level."

A social studies teacher at Lincoln (9) also argued that this range of information on students would help teachers know how to approach students: "I'd like to see reading levels printed on the sheets we get [class lists], and what their grades were, say in the last two years of social studies or English, so I can get an idea of their general attitude. Also, something on their social background -- who is from a one parent family. Also, which have been in jail, sadly enough, so I know what kinds of social interaction they've had and need. These students might need the extra touch, a hand on their shoulder now and then, etc."

An ESL teacher at Jefferson (1) also explained how standards for performance might be adjusted in view of knowledge of a student's personal circumstances: "I want to know who their ESL teachers were, because I know the teachers and what they stressed and what their styles are. I'd like to know the students' working schedules, family life -- as much as they are willing to tell, so I can be more understanding and know why they don't do what I expect them to do."

An English teacher at Lincoln (4) relayed how such information had been unavailable in the past: "I'd like to know if the student has a medical problem, or if they are in special education. I ask the students to fill out a card with their name, address, etc. It has happened that a student has a problem, and I don't learn about it until months later."

A Jefferson English teacher (8) also discussed how information on a student's academic background and personal situation would be useful: "If it's a new student, I'd like to know from other teachers what the student is like, their personality, so I know what sets a student off. I'd like a transcript that doesn't have the class failures deleted [apparently the transcripts for seniors have class failures deleted before they are sent to colleges].... Also, students' relationships with their parents, their home situation so I can know what I'm getting into. Will the student be absent because there's a 3-month old baby at home?"

A special education teacher at Lincoln (10) remarked about the needs of special education teachers and how traditional records often fail to meet those needs: "You get the IEP and strategies to use to intervene. But it's rarely up to date and accurate; that's why you do your own assessment -- I trust that a lot more. The best thing would be to have contact with the student's former teacher, to see where they left off. This is supposed to be in the IEP, but it's not really. I think that's because people try to make things look good in the IEP. We do talk to other teachers in the department, but not as often as we could -- they assume we'll talk, but there's not time for it. This would be a good thing. It's very hard to come together as a department. Our students have such hard family lives, you'd like to know what's going on. One teacher may know something, but there's no way for that teacher to share it. It can make all the difference to know this stuff."

Quality of Assessments

Teachers were asked to reflect on the quality or the validity of the assessments that they make of students in their classes. Two questions were used to seek these reflections. One question asked for an overall estimation of the quality of the assessment process. A second question asked teachers to comment on those students who were particularly difficult to evaluate.

Estimation of General Quality. A number of teachers felt quite comfortable with the quality of their assessments of students. Some teachers attributed the accuracy of their assessments to their experience. An English teacher at Jackson (1) reported that "Yes, I can get a valid assessment because of my experience." Similarly, a math teacher at Lincoln (5) noted that "I'm really good at that. I've been teaching a long time. I do it analytically and then throw in the social aspect." However, a math teacher at Jackson (3) suggested that youth rather than experience was key to being able to assess students

accurately: "I can assess accurately cause I am young and have rapport and can pick certain things up."

Some teachers suggested that accurate assessment was quite easy. For example, a special education teacher at Jackson (4) reported that assessments were "Pretty much on target. [I] know in the first week who the non-readers are; they're the ones who act out." For other teachers the ease of the assessment process was facilitated by their subject matter: a Lincoln social studies teacher (9) noted that "Oh, yes, that's not a problem. I assess students frequently, and I generally can tell pretty quickly how students can do, and I'm careful not to be too subjective. And my subject area is factual -- if you don't know it, you don't know it." Of course, this reflects only one conceptualization of social studies.

Several teachers reported greater comfort with their assessments of students as time went on in the term. A science teacher at Washington (5) told us that "Yes, I can assess them fairly, at least in the second half of the term." A science teacher at Lincoln (10) responded similarly when asked whether he could assess student performance accurately: "Yes, I do, because I have been with them and know them very well by the end of the year and know what they're capable of."

Several teachers felt that they took special steps to move beyond traditional testing techniques to produce accurate assessments of student performance. A special education teacher at Washington (5) explained that "...besides the usual tests and so on, a teacher has to get to know a student personally. Maybe Sally's not working up to potential because she's having problems at home, so if you find this out you won't hold it against the students." A science teacher at Jefferson (5) also went beyond traditional assessments, claiming that "Yes, my methods are accurate. They are also based on class observations. This term I have 19 students, so during classwork you more or less know how they're doing."

An English teacher at Washington felt that the assessment system was satisfactory given the parameters of the class, reporting that "Yes, given this framework. It's heavily weighted toward writing and reading skills. I try to allow for some verbal ability, but that can only count for so much in a class focused on reading and writing."

Several teachers made distinctions between assessing specific student performance in class and assessing student ability. A math teacher at Jackson (2) observed that he could "...assess performance but not their ability, for example if they are not performing up to their ability." Similarly an English teacher at Lincoln (4) noted that "Sometimes it is difficult to assess students. You sometimes can't get at their real ability because the students don't perform up to their ability." A French teacher at Lincoln argued that performance and ability were best assessed through different means: "I can assess performance through the assignments. Ability is better assessed through my interactions with them. Some students have the ability, but don't do the assignments."

A number of teachers pointed to more general problems with the assessment process in their classrooms. Several teachers noted the limitations of assessment techniques that they felt compelled to utilize for other reasons. A math teacher at Roosevelt High School (2) felt constrained by school policy: "...for lack of a better way I do it this way. The school has a kind of format for computing grades. 10% is class performance, etc. We have to stick to this, but I don't know if it's real accurate." An ESL teacher at Jackson (7) with five years experience used classroom tasks that were more motivating for students, but worried that they were more difficult to assess: "I really have so many questions about it, I wish I could say I've really got all my teaching together, but I don't. My goal is to turn the students on who have had lots of problems, failures, before...but I often use creative projects that make it hard to assess their work. If there's content in the project, I'll test it. I have little quizzes and stuff along the way and that helps with assessment."

A science teacher at Jackson (8) felt forced to base assessment more heavily on tests because of student absenteeism: You can tell if a student is getting it or not getting it, but as far as telling if a student got 90% or 73% of

what they were supposed to get, that's hard, because students' attendance is so erratic. That forces me to rely more on tests than on daily work for assessment. They may come in after being absent for 5 days. I won't have the test ready that they missed, so I'll say you have to wait until Monday [to take the test]; they might not come back then and not take the test, or I'll throw it at them at the end of the term and they'll fail because they didn't get a review session."

A number of teachers also felt that the social and family conditions in which their students lived placed special burdens on the assessment process. A vocational teacher at Roosevelt (1) pointed out that "Our students have lots of problems that interfere with their work. One student had an abortion, two got kicked out of their homes. We have a lot of family problems. A lot of the parents were young when they had children and don't know how to be parents."

An English teacher at the same high school (3) also pointed to the special problems faced by disadvantaged students: "I often feel as if a student doesn't reveal himself completely. Some students do not like to write or aren't able to write. Some are very distracted, some may have seen a parental fight or something horrible in the morning and just aren't ready to write about Shakespeare. You can't assess what the student is worth academically if the student is very distracted. Why did I have to wait until November to learn that a student had children, or that the babies are sick?"

Thus teachers differed in their reflections on the quality of their assessments of students. Some teachers felt that the quality of their assessments was high; many others had concerns or were not sure. Teachers sometimes found their formal assessment practices limiting, for example, in getting beyond students' literacy skills, or determining student ability as distinct from immediate performance. Teachers also noted that the disadvantageous family and community conditions in which their students found themselves were often distracting to students and made it difficult for teachers to determine how students might perform under less distracting circumstances.

Difficulty. Finally, to probe further for problems with the assessment of student performance in these schools serving disadvantaged youth, we asked the teachers to discuss any students who might be particularly difficult to assess. Although several teachers reported that there were no students that were particularly difficult to evaluate, most teachers mentioned at least one of five types of problems in assessing student performance: frequent absences, inconsistent patterns of performance, differences between students' background experiences and school literacy demands, students' verbosity or quietness, and immigrant language problems.

Students who are absent frequently were cited as difficult to evaluate. Lack of contact with these students and lack of information on their performance is clearly a problem. As an English teacher at Jackson (10) noted, it is "difficult to assess anyone who goes truant; you don't know what's happening with the student." Patterns of truancy are often related to outside problems among the students in these high schools. Such students were also singled out as problematic by a science teacher at Washington High School (5) who argued that it is difficult to evaluate "The ones who are having personal problems that preclude their coming to school; they're really hard and you don't see them enough."

Some students who are not in school are on home instruction for personal reasons, and teachers also noted problems evaluating these students. An English teacher at Roosevelt High School (5) reported that "This year I've had a lot of students out for maternity leave, and I've had trouble getting material from them to monitor them, even with home instruction."

Finally, another problem with truant students concerns the task of making sense of the performance they put forth when they are in school. As a science teacher at Lincoln (10) asked: "...the hard core students who are out most of the time but do well when they're in school -- how do you evaluate these students?"

Teachers also reported that inconsistent patterns of student performance made it difficult

to assess students. A vocational teacher at Washington (10) provided some examples: "I had a few that were very hard -- about four. Sometimes they'd be right into the class, but then would draw blanks in the quizzes. And some did nothing all year long and then did well on the final."

A science teacher at Roosevelt High School (8) linked patterns of inconsistent performance to the outside conditions confronting the students in these schools: "Especially in the last few years, what troubles me is inconsistent student performance -- students will do great work but then have a period of stumbling. But generally, I have enough data to catch on. Too many students are working [outside of school] and they get physically stretched and blitzed. And there is incredible home life instability. I have students who have no idea what they're facing when they go home." In view of the backgrounds of these students, this is a good explanation of inconsistent student performance.

Some of the teachers noted an inconsistency related to the disjunction between the background experiences of some students and the literacy demands of the school program. As one social studies teacher at Jefferson (11) put it: "There are a group of American students who are oriented to the street; they're extremely verbal and dominate discussions, but have a total blank on writing...." A social studies teacher at Washington (6) noted a similar problem: "I might get one impression of a student in class; he might seem fluent, but then I get a contradiction when I see the written work." Another social studies teacher at Washington (7) attributed the problem to the school program: "There are students who don't read or write well; I think they're intelligent, but the system doesn't allow them to succeed -- it's too based on reading and writing."

If verbal students present one kind of assessment challenge, quiet students present another. An English teacher at Jefferson (9) explained: "Some students are very quiet -- you can't tell what they know until they write." A social studies teacher at Lincoln (9) voiced a similar concern: "The non-talkers are the hardest."

When students are very quiet in class teachers often cannot ascertain why they are quiet and what it means about what they know. As an English teacher at Lincoln (2) explained: "Some students are hard to assess -- like the ones who are the quietest, you have to drag information out of them, and you don't know the reason why they're quiet -- maybe they don't get the material, or maybe they just don't do the work."

Of course, as in the case of the very verbal students, the situation of the quiet students may be related to their background experiences. A social studies teacher at Jefferson, the high school that receives many Asian immigrants, observed that "Traditional Chinese students are hard because they're SO quiet in class. The really good students in China, we're told, don't speak in class."

Immigrant students in general pose challenges for teachers attempting to evaluate student performance. A social studies teacher at Jefferson (7) said that it was "...most difficult to assess immigrant students" because "You don't know if it's language or a content deficit" when students seem to have problems. A social studies teacher at Washington High School (4) commented particularly on Hispanic students: "It's hard with the Hispanic students. They're so nice, eager to learn, but the language is a problem for them and you wonder why they've been mainstreamed. I'm thinking of two students who are so nice, so gracious, and probably shouldn't be just in bilingual ed., but they are not doing well [in my classes]."

Once again it is apparent that at-risk students pose challenges for the evaluations of performance conducted by their teachers. At-risk youth are more likely to have sporadic attendance and to confront external situations that distract them when they are in attendance. Such students may also have styles of interaction (e.g., exclusively verbal or overly quiet) that make it difficult for teachers to get a clear sense of their ability and performance. Finally, teachers have difficulty assessing the role of the language barrier in the performance of immigrant students for whom English is a second language.

Discussion

The reports of the 78 teachers in these five high schools serving disadvantaged student populations provide some insight into the challenges confronting teachers who must assess student performance. Moreover, they indicate some of the ways in which teachers are coping with such challenges.

The teachers reported that the outside conditions in which at-risk students live make it difficult for teachers to know how such students would perform under conditions that are more conducive to learning. Thus, although teachers may be able to evaluate at-risk students in terms of predetermined or normative criteria and standards, the special disadvantaging conditions under which these students live raise the question as to when such approaches are appropriate. Moreover, some aspects of the school lives of at-risk youth -- such as their inconsistent attendance -- make even gathering sufficient information on their performance problematic. With teachers' reflections on the dilemmas of evaluating at-risk students in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the patterns of assessment practices observed actually develop.

The teacher reports indicate that students who are more disadvantaged are likely to be subjected to more open and fewer closed assessments of their performance. Such students are also more likely to have dimensions of performance such as attendance and effort included in their assessments and to be assessed in terms of ipsative, ability-based or effort-based standards. Each of these strategies may be interpreted as teachers struggling to construct evaluation systems that offer disadvantaged students some hope of experiencing success. Each may also be interpreted as efforts by teachers to maintain a viable evaluation system in the classroom -- a system that has meaningful positive and negative sanctions for students. However, these same strategies may also be interpreted as a lowering of standards to accommodate disadvantaged students.

Other evidence from the interview responses suggests that at least some teachers of disadvantaged students in these high schools are not trying to avoid the challenge of assessing student performance. These are the teachers who report that they keep more extensive records of the performance of lower achieving classes, that they are more likely to use an initial assessment activity at the start of the term with their lower level classes, and that they want more information on the academic and social background of their less advantaged students.

Some teachers lower standards when dealing with disadvantaged students (Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984). The present analysis makes it clear that lowering standards is only one small part of the process of adapting assessment practices to accommodate students who are at risk. Until we have a greater understanding of the dynamics of the evaluation process as it affects disadvantaged students, efforts to adjust assessment policy to improve the educational process for these students should proceed slowly.

References

Airasian, P. W. (1991). *Classroom assessment*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Archbald, D. A. & Porter, A. C. (1990). *A retrospective and an analysis of roles of mandated testing in educational reform*. Paper prepared for the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, Washington, DC.

Baker, E. L. (1989). Mandated tests: Educational reform or quality indicator? Pp. 2-23 in B. R. Gifford (ed.), *Test policy and test performance: Education, language, and culture*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer.

Berlak, H., Newmann, F. M., Adams, E., Archbald, D. A., Burgess, T., Raven, J., & Romberg, T. A. (1992). *Toward a new science of educational testing and assessment*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Crooks, T. J. (1988). The impact of classroom evaluation practices on students. *Review of Educational Research, 58*:438-481.

Goertz, M. (1988). *State educational standards in the 50 states: An update*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Hanson, F. A. (1993). *Testing testing: Social consequences of the examined life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Herman, J. & Door-Bremme, D. W. (1984). *Testing and assessment in American public schools: Current practices and directions for improvement*. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Evaluation.

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Milofsky, C. (1989). *Testers and testing: The sociology of school psychology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Mitchell, R. (1992). *Testing for learning: How new approaches to evaluation can improve American schools*. New York: The Free Press.

Natriello, G. (1987a). *Evaluation processes in schools and classrooms*. (Report No. 12) Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University, Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools.

Natriello, G. (1987b). The impact of evaluation processes on students. *Educational Psychologist, 22*:155-175.

Natriello, G. & Dornbusch, S. M. (1984). *Teacher evaluative standards and student effort*. A volume in the Institute for Research on Teaching Research Monograph Series. New York: Longman.

Natriello, G. & McPartland, J. (1987, April). *Adjustments in high school teachers grading criteria? Accommodation or motivation?* Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Washington, DC.

Natriello, G., Pallas, A. M. & Riehl, C. J. (1990). *Creating more responsive student evaluation systems for disadvantaged students* (Report No. 15). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University, Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students.

Neill, D. M. & Medina, N. J. (1989, May). Standardized testing: Harmful to educational health. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 688-697.

Resnick, L. B. (1992). Why we need national standards and exams. *State Education Leader, 11*:4-5.

Stiggins, R. J. & Conklin, N. I. (1992). *In teachers' hands: Investigating the practice of classroom assessment*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

U.S. Department of Education. (1991). *America 2000: An education strategy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.